

SURVEILLANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE EYE OF POWER

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Abstract

People have long been concerned about surveillance and self-surveillance. The Ancient Greek gods gazing down from the Olympus Mountain or the monotheistic god of the Judeo-Christian religions were all understood as all-seeing. With the society changing and being more and more secularized surveillance gained new forms indirectly incited by the old ones, at least in part.

Bentham, who lived from the mid-18th to the beginning of the 19th century, was an English law theorist, philosopher and active reform initiator, who is best known as the pioneer of utilitarianism. As an utilitarianist, Bentham was concerned with maximum benefit, reached with minimum effort. By seeking to optimize the efficiency of prisons and other surveillance institutions, he pursued to change surveillance into self-surveillance. If in an ordinary prison the inmate feels surveilled only when the guard passes by, then in a panopticon style prison the inmate feels surveilled all the time. To achieve it Bentham utilized a strict architectural solution – the panopticon must consist of a ring-form building with an observatory-tower in the middle. Each cell's walls, that are towards the inside and the outside of the ring, are transparent, therefore the light from the tower in the middle of the ring, would light through each cell. Whereas the walls between the cells are not transparent, thus they don't see each other. (Bentham, 1995),

In the twentieth century Bentham's panopticon project was re-discovered. A real sensation became the French philosophers Micheal Foucault's book “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison” (Foucault, 1998), in which the conception of the panopticism is presented. It provided a big influence for visibility research. Foucault comes back the Bentham's panopticon idea not to discuss the architectural idea, but to argue about the surveillance mechanism that are engraved into our society. For him panopticon isn't a building anymore. It's all of society's framework, where individuals each moment implement their own subjugation. Foucault uses Bentham's panopticon prison conception as a metaphor to unveil the society's body filled with power.

Thom Mathiesen in his influential media research paper “The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault’s Panopticon Revisited” draws attention to the fact that Foucault doesn’t mention television or other forms of mass media when he talks about surveillance in the modern society. In his opinion, it isn’t irrelevant. According to him, that would fundamentally change Foucault’s conception of the modern society, as well as the important surveillance element. Mathiesen thinks, that time that Foucault indicates as the shift towards a panoptical society, not accidentally coincides with the rapid growth of mass media: “The total time span of this development - the past 150 to 200 years - coincides most remarkably with the period of the modern growth of panopticism. Increasingly, the few have been able to see the many, but also increasingly, the many have been enabled to see the few [Synopticon concept] - to see the VIPs, the reporters, the stars, almost a new class in the public sphere.” (Mathiesen, 1997).

With the advancement of technology, the rapid availability of personal computers, the development of the Internet, the massive spread of social networks, surveillance and self-surveillance mechanisms have changed again and are changing still. In this paper we are thinking, what kind of transformation it is.

Purpose – The purpose of the research is to reflect on the nature of surveillance, gaze and power in the modern society.

Design/methodology/approach – analysis and comparison of scientific literature, analysis of social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) content.

Finding – The gaze of the algorithm has nothing to do with conscious, not like the gaze of god or humans. It only records, profiles, observes even not understanding what it’s observing. Although the gaze of the algorithm with its absolute non-body, resembles the idea of the gaze of god more than the gaze of human, however, still, behind the contemporary gaze of the algorithm can lie the well-hidden gaze of the human.

We live the most intensely surveilled century, as humanity has ever experienced, however despite it, we care the least about this surveillance. One of the main reasons for it, we could say that the implied surveillor hasn’t got any moral values, prejudice and self-consciousness. Still, with these rapid developments, the situation can change irreversibly. We underestimate the power of the gaze of the algorithm, providing bigger possibilities to be visible. In the change of government or unexpectedly improved AI, the intertwined surveillance network could totally abolish our feeling of anonymity in a scale never seen before.

Research limitations/implications – this research is based on analysis of surveillance in social media. For future investigation it would be necessary to do a bigger research and include schemes of CCTV surveillance, especially mass surveillance in nowadays China and facial recognition system, which they use.

Practical implications – the research reveals what kind of surveillance format the social networks empower. And what kind of future threats potentially hides behind it. This can be applied not only by researchers and communication specialist working with big data streams, but also the consumers of social networks, in order to protect their

privacy and information. Also, the research is useful for experts and politicians, working with future cybernetic and data security strategies.

Originality/Value – Most the researchers working in this field, who talk about social networks using Mathiesen’s Synopticon concept, do not discuss the panoptical potential of the social networks or are inclined to move to the post-panoptical viewpoint. Discussing the powers of surveillance active in the social networks, not only the synoptic, but also the panoptic aspect as well as the interaction between the two models is discussed. The research emphasizes not only the surveillance between humans, but also the algorithmic surveillance. Also, the research discusses the reason, why in these times surveillance is widely spread as ever before; underlines the supposed disinterest of the algorithm and the absolute non-body, which provides the consumer with the spectacle of anonymity, and the potential future threats that comes with it.

Keywords: Surveillance, Foucault, Panopticon, Synopticon, Bentham, Mathiesen, Social Media.

Research type: research paper.

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